

Introduction

PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The urban village strategy is the central theme of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan. The plan, adopted in 1994, revolves around focusing growth in urban villages throughout the city as a sustainable means of accommodating growth. Neighborhoods developed plans for each urban village area in order to help support the development of these areas.

After eight years of experience with the urban village strategy, this study asks the following questions: Is the strategy working? Under what circumstances have goals been achieved or progress made? Can the success of the strategy be improved by learning from experience thus far?

The purpose of this report is to assess the ways in which the urban village strategy is or is not being fulfilled and to understand why. Specifically, these studies will answer two questions:

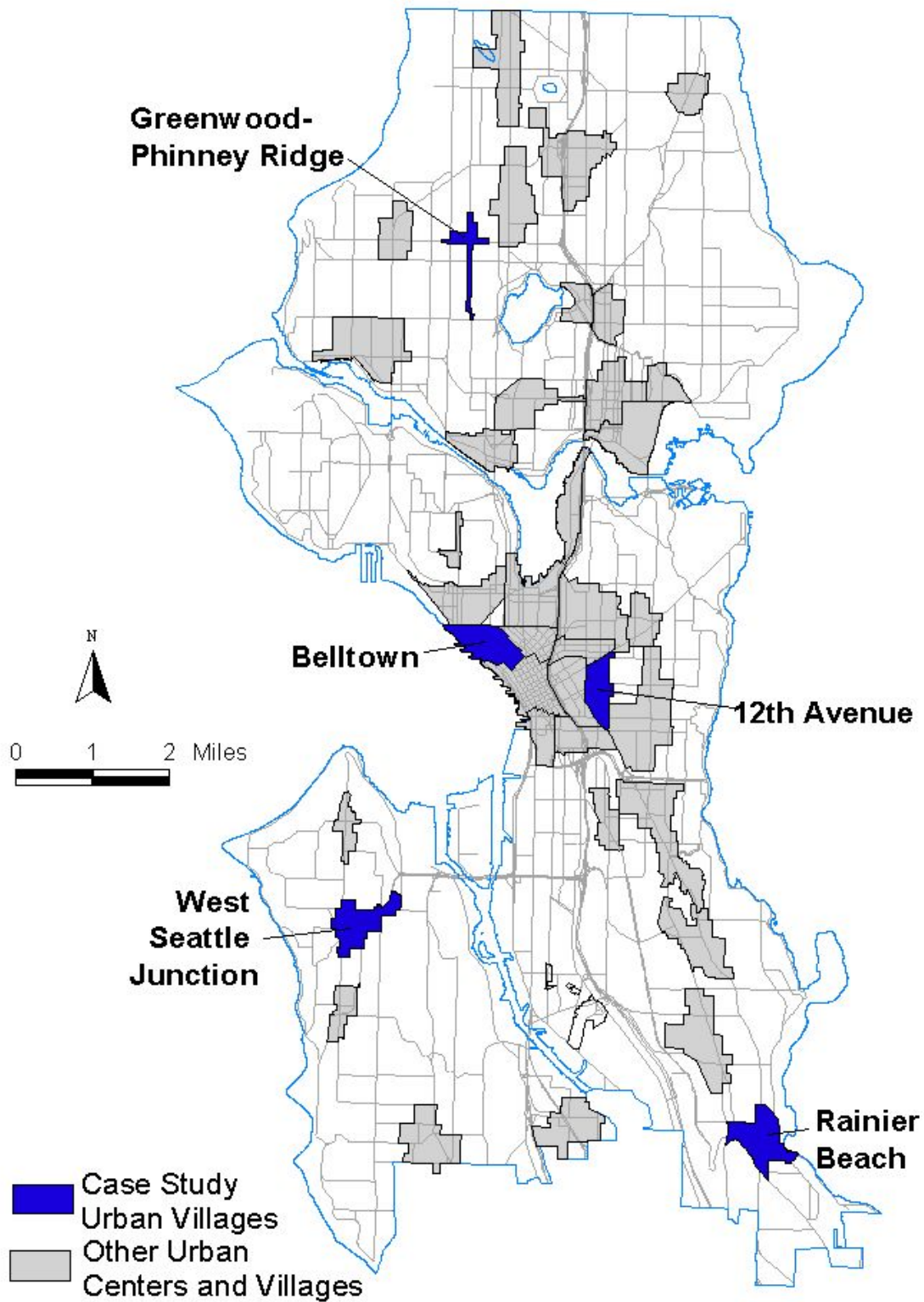
- **In what ways have the goals of the urban village strategy been achieved?**
- **What explains these successes (and failures)?**

A case study approach was used to answer these questions. Using case studies enabled a deeper study of a small number of neighborhoods. Five urban villages of various types were chosen for this study: 12th Avenue, Belltown, Greenwood-Phinney Ridge, Rainier Beach, and the West Seattle Junction. These villages were chosen with the objective of learning from a variety of places and situations. They were selected to represent a variety of locations within the city, sizes and types of urban villages, current and historic land use, and their extent of growth.

There is no one typical urban village, they are all unique. The City's urban villages are at different stages of development, with different assets and deficiencies. The city's urban villages include the densest and fastest-changing neighborhoods in the state and other areas that have had little development in the last thirty years. Some have a broad range of parks and open space or many different public facilities. Others have had little publicly-owned open space and require a bus ride to access a library or community center. The villages that were chosen presented a variety of circumstances. It was hoped that through looking at a range of experiences, commonalities would appear and lessons would be learned that could improve the City's overall policies and activities. Hopefully, other neighborhoods will also find useful models for their future work. Many other urban villages could have been picked for these case studies, but the five that were chosen seemed to cover well the variety of urban village conditions.

Findings are presented by neighborhood. For each, the urban village conditions are described as of the early and mid-1990s, before neighborhood planning. The neighborhood plan is presented, especially as it addresses the urban village strategy. Then, current conditions are assessed with respect to the goals of the strategy. Conclusions are also presented for each neighborhood.

City of Seattle Case Study Urban Villages



THE FIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

In the east sector, the 12th Avenue Urban Center Village is a neighborhood that had high residential growth in the late 1990s after many years of little or no growth. Employment growth, however, appeared to be on the decline. 12th Avenue also is home to a number of institutions (Seattle University, King County, and others) and a high concentration of social service providers.

Belltown, another Urban Center Village, had the highest growth rate in the city, with its population more than doubling in the 1990s. Newer, wealthier residents are juxtaposed with an existing population, many of whom were homeless or low-income residents. Employment in the village also grew during this period.

In the northwest, Greenwood-Phinney Ridge drew attention as a Residential Urban Village; after years with little growth, there was a residential growth surge in the 1990s. Like 12th Avenue, this village had relatively few new amenities or infrastructure improvements prior to the development of the neighborhood plan.

In the southeast sector, Rainier Beach experienced an increase in population while adding relatively few new housing units. This is also a Residential Urban Village, but in contrast to Greenwood-Phinney Ridge, Rainier Beach has a lot of subsidized housing and many other public facilities.

While the West Seattle Junction has experienced steady housing growth over many years, employment growth had not followed. Its neighborhood plan focused on two adjacent commercial areas, one pedestrian-oriented, the other auto-oriented. The Junction is the only Hub urban village chosen for case study.

GMA AND THE COMPREHENSIVE AND NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS

The motivation for this analysis reaches back to the 1990 Washington Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA stipulates that new growth (population and jobs) should occur in existing urban areas to minimize the negative effects of urban sprawl and make efficient use of urban services. The GMA also requires every urbanized local government to create a comprehensive plan that states how it could accommodate expected population growth. In response to the GMA, the City of Seattle adopted a Comprehensive Plan in 1994 that directs growth away from existing single-family areas and into neighborhoods where concentrations of commercial zoning and services and high-density residences were already found. These areas containing a mix of uses were designated “Urban Villages” and form the backbone of the Comprehensive Plan’s Urban Village Strategy.

THE URBAN VILLAGE STRATEGY

The urban village strategy is designed to accommodate growth while improving public transportation through the city, providing desirable and affordable housing, investing in facilities and services to serve higher density neighborhoods, and making decisions based on neighborhoods’ expressed priorities.

The urban village strategy seeks to develop and enhance the following characteristics in urban villages:

- **Diversity:** “A diverse mix of people of varied ages, incomes, cultures, employment, and interests.”
- **Commercial Areas:** “Vibrant, pedestrian-oriented commercial areas with stores, services and, in certain villages, employment.”
- **Housing:** “A variety of housing types, ranging appropriately for each village scale to meet the needs and preferences of the diverse community.”
- **Relationship between Residential and Commercial Areas:** “A strong relationship between residential and commercial areas.”
- **Community Facilities:** “Community facilities, including schools, community and recreation centers, libraries, parks, and human services within walking distance of the village core” (walking distance equals one-quarter mile).
- **Partnerships for Services, Activities, and Interaction:** “Partnerships with neighborhood and community-based organizations to improve people’s access to services and activities and to create opportunities for interaction through such means as neighborhood planning and community policing.”
- **Transit, Bike, and Pedestrian Facilities for Connectivity and Circulation:** “Transit, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities with connections to neighboring villages, good circulation within the village and between the village and surrounding neighborhoods.”
- **Open Space and Recreation Opportunities:** “Well-integrated public open space, providing recreational opportunities for village residents and workers.”
- **Community Identity:** “A unique identity reflecting local history, the village’s natural feature, its culture, and other sources of community pride.”

This study considers if and how these features of urban villages are being developed or enhanced in the chosen urban villages.

The Comprehensive Plan includes the designation of thirty seven urban villages: five urban centers – three of which are divided into urban center villages, seven “hub urban villages,” and eighteen “residential urban villages.” Each type of urban village has a different focus. Urban Centers are a countywide designation. They are intended to be the areas of greatest growth and density. They are employment and housing centers providing jobs and housing to large numbers of people in locations with excellent regional transit access. Hub urban villages are also intended to provide locations of significant job growth and housing growth, but on a smaller scale than planned for urban centers. Residential urban villages are primarily intended to be locations of residential growth with healthy neighborhood commercial areas.

DESIGNATION OF URBAN VILLAGES AND GROWTH TARGETS

Two sets of criteria were used to identify and designate urban villages. Under general criteria in the Comprehensive Plan, an area that met the following criteria was considered for designation as an urban village:

- Location on the city’s transportation and transit network;

- The potential to enhance an existing character – or develop a new character – as a pedestrian-friendly, vibrant commercial district with a variety of services; and
- Zoning in place that could accommodate growth and development.
- Along with these general criteria the City Council adopted a set of specific criteria. These objective criteria define conditions likely to make an area function well as an urban village, including:
 - The ability to achieve residential densities which will support compact living and pedestrian and transit-friendly environments;
 - For Hub Urban Villages, the ability to achieve employment densities that will support compact living and pedestrian-and transit-friendly environments;
 - Enough land zoned for commercial use to provide convenient goods and services to Village residents; and
 - Access to the local and regional transportation network.

Growth targets were established for each urban village by distributing the citywide household and employment growth targets, which the Growth Management Planning Council of King County assigned to Seattle. The city was expected to accommodate growth of some 60,000 households and 147,000 jobs from 1994 to 2014. The Seattle City Council adopted urban village growth targets that were aimed at achieving densities that could support transit use and that could occur within the development capacity of each neighborhood.

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING 1994-1999

Emerging from the Comprehensive Plan, the City embarked on an ambitious neighborhood planning program. According to the Plan, neighborhood plans “tailor the [Comprehensive Plan’s] citywide perspective to individual urban and manufacturing centers, villages and neighborhoods. Neighborhood plans are expected to continue to aid in adjusting and fine-tuning the Plan over time.”

The City established a Neighborhood Planning Office to administer the planning process. The neighborhood planning process was created with the thought that residents of urban villages would be in a better position to recognize the needs of the neighborhoods in accommodating the Comprehensive Plan’s growth targets. The City funded and supported the preparation of neighborhood plans, which were directed by community members. Each plan resulted in the addition of neighborhood-specific goals and policies to the Comprehensive Plan and in identifying a package of programmatic and infrastructural needs that would help the neighborhood accommodate its expected growth.

RELATED STUDIES

In a recent report, *Neighborhood Plan Stewardship Survey* (May 2001), the Seattle Planning Commission observed that:

- neighborhoods organized in many different ways to carry out plan stewardship;

- stewards maintain a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to their adopted plans;
- while residents volunteer to help administer specific local projects it is harder for them to sustain plan advocacy over time;
- stewards struggle to keep up with monitoring projects, informing the neighborhood, and recruiting help;
- few resources are available to support communications, grant applications, and other administrative requirements of stewardship; and
- the informality of the City's relationships with stewardship groups may weaken the viability of neighborhood plans over time.

The report did not address other aspects of the urban village strategy directly.

Using interviews and documentary evidence the League of Women Voters (LWV) raised several issues about the process of neighborhood plan implementation in their *Neighborhood Planning and Vision of the City Update* (2001). Among the findings were that:

- new infrastructure and amenities are lagging growth;
- there is no clear consensus definition for equitable funding or how to measure it;
- City policies do not adequately manage the timing and scale of development;
- despite a high rate of housing growth, "housing is still unaffordable for working families;"
- gentrification is occurring in Seattle;
- the burden on ordinary citizens for neighborhood plan stewardship — such as applying for project funding (Neighborhood Matching Funds) — requires skills, time, and other resources that are not equally available across neighborhoods resulting in potential inequities in funding;
- neighborhood planning groups may not always be representative of their community;
- entities independent of the city do not cooperate with neighborhood plans, and indeed that even some city departments are difficult to work with; and
- finally, neighborhood plans don't directly accommodate the needs of children.

In addition to these issues, the LWV report provided lists of completed and in-progress neighborhood plan projects, inventoried sources of funding for such projects, and profiled three cases that raised additional issues. The LWV did not, however, attempt to evaluate the success of neighborhood plans with respect to their stated goals or directly address the urban village strategy.

The Department of Neighborhoods (DON) tracks progress for all projects called for in neighborhood plans and reports the status on a quarterly basis. Other studies evaluate livability, service effectiveness, and other accomplishments in Seattle, but do not measure

them at an urban village level. Among these are the *Citywide Residential Surveys*, the biennial Comprehensive Plan monitoring reports by the Department of Design Construction and Land Use, the *Downtown Housing Report* by the City's Office of Housing, and *Communities Count*, prepared by the King County Indicators Initiative Partners.

WHAT THE STUDY DOES NOT ATTEMPT TO DO

Some urban villages are neighborhoods unto themselves. Other urban villages are important parts of much larger neighborhoods. Finally, some urban villages cross the boundaries of more than one neighborhood. As neighborhood plans were developed, communities were able to decide what area they were going to plan for, as long as planning was done for the urban village itself. As a result, neighborhood planning areas for some urban villages include large areas outside of urban villages, other planning areas include only the urban village. The goal of this study was to focus on how the City's urban village strategy is working, rather than analyze the effectiveness of the City's neighborhood planning process. This has meant that some issues of interest to the broader neighborhood planning areas are not discussed, and data related to the broader neighborhood planning areas are not analyzed. A broader look at how Seattle's neighborhoods are evolving would be a worthwhile undertaking, but that is not the purpose of this study.

Given the limited time and resources available to research and produce the report, this paper does not attempt to address all goals or policies contained in the Comprehensive Plan or neighborhood plans. This study also does not recommend, and is not intended to imply, policy solutions for shortcomings in achievement. In addition, no pretense is made that this report is scientifically valid, but is as much as possible, a thorough and even-handed assessment.